Extremely Rare Fairbury Engine Returns Home over a Century Later

By: Dale C. Maley
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Farmers between 1890 and 1940 used hit-and-miss engines. Because farmers were the last people to get electricity, these engines were a power source before electricity. Farmers used them for many tasks, including pumping water and grinding feed. Once a farm received electrical service, there was no more need for these engines.

In 2016, Paul Sams, an Iowa collector of hit-and-miss engines, saw an engine for sale and the nameplate said the model name was Midget, manufactured by the Fairbury Motor Works Company. Paul had never seen this manufacturer before, and he was intrigued by this engine. Mr. Sams called the Fairbury Dominy Library and asked if they had information about the company that made the engine.

When the Dominy Library receives a history information request and doesn't know the answer, they refer the patron to this reporter. Mr. Sams was contacted, and he provided photos of the engine.

Historical research discovered that Joseph Jesse Slagel (1883-1915) was a brilliant mechanical mind from Fairbury. Joseph had a machine shop at the northwest corner of Sixth and Locust Streets intersection. He formed a company and named it the Fairbury Motor Works. In 1906, at the age of 22, Joseph Slagel received a U.S. Patent for a steam engine lubricator.

Around 1910, Joseph J. Slagel started to manufacture and sell hit-and-miss engines. In 1911, Joseph Slagel teamed up with one of Fairbury's early plumbers, C. B. Day, and they did a joint exhibit at the Fairbury Fair. The exhibition demonstrated how Slagel's hit-and-miss engine could pump and store water in tanks for farmers.

Unfortunately, Joseph Slagel encountered some severe health issues. He sold his Fairbury machine shop and moved to New Mexico in 1914 for a better climate for his health issue. Many early cars used acetylene gas at high pressure to power the headlights. This lighting system was called the Prestolite tank and generator. Joseph owned such a vehicle in New Mexico. Joseph was a natural tinkerer, so he attempted to fix the headlight system on his car. Unfortunately, the car blew up and mortally wounded Joseph. He died shortly after the explosion and was only 32 years old. Joseph's body was returned to Fairbury and was buried in Graceland Cemetery. It is unknown how many hit-and-miss engines Joseph Slagel built in his Fairbury shop.

After learning about the unique history of the Fairbury Motor Works, Paul Sams purchased the engine in Iowa for his collection. This reporter also posted the background of the machine on a website devoted to hit-and-miss engines at Smokstak.com. Mr. Sams

reported taking the unique engine to a show in Iowa. None of the over 50 collectors at the show had ever seen a Fairbury Motor Works engine.

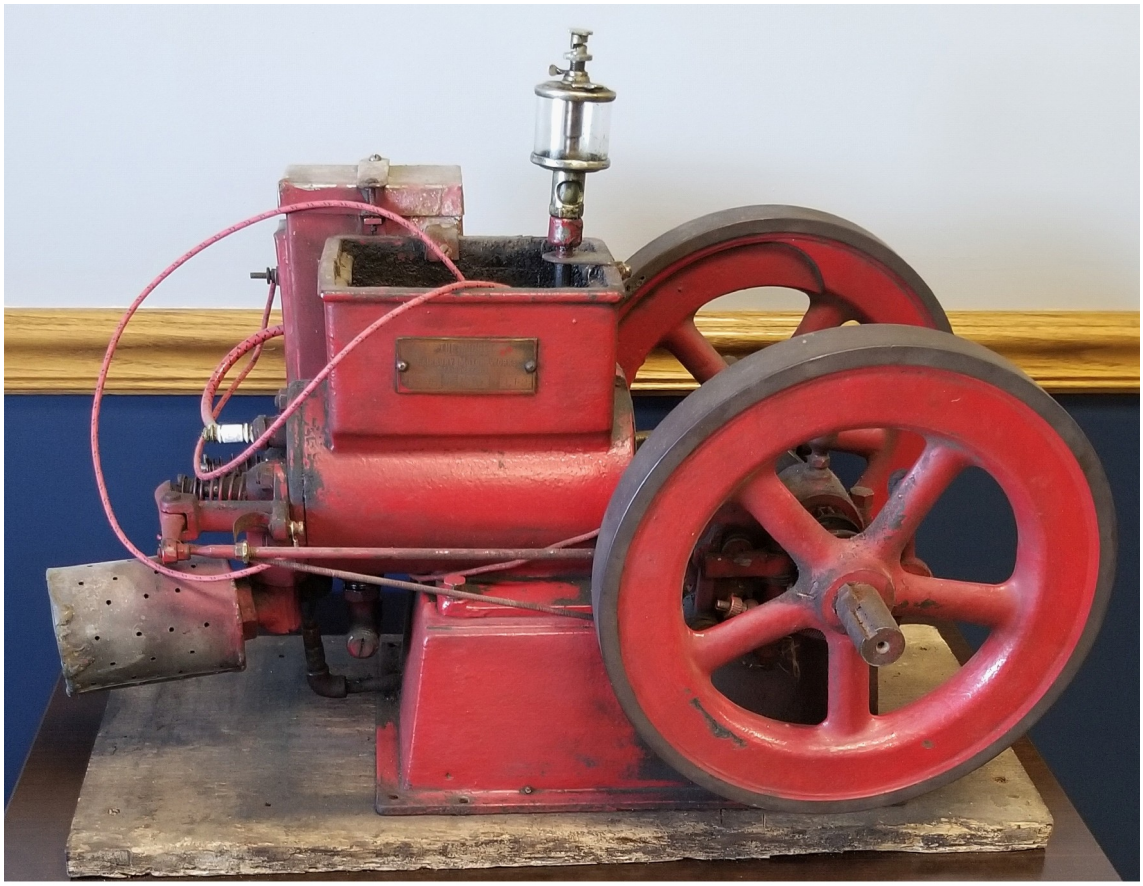
It was discovered that there were just four Fairbury Motor Works hit-and-miss engines left in the world. Two engines were in Fairbury, one was in Indiana, and Paul Sams had the fourth engine in Iowa.

In April of 2019, an owner of an antique shop in Minnesota purchased several farm buildings in Iowa. She bought the buildings with the contents still in the buildings. When she started to sort the building contents, she found a hit-and-miss engine manufactured by Fairbury Motor Works. The antique shop owner then did a Google search about the Fairbury Motor Works company. The Google search found the history of the engine on the Smokstak.com website. The antique shop owner then contacted this reporter. Many unsuccessful attempts were made over several months to purchase this engine for the Fairbury Echoes Museum.

This reporter then contacted brothers Mark and Donald Slagel, who operate Slagel Manufacturing in Forrest, Illinois. These brothers are great-grandnephews of Joseph J. Slagel that manufactured the hit-in-miss engines in Fairbury in the early 1910s. This reporter acted as a broker and purchased the Midget engine for the Slagel brothers from the Minnesota antique shop owner. A representative of the Slagel brothers made the 560 mile trip from Forrest to Adrian, Minnesota, to return the engine home to the Fairbury area.

With serial number 288, this engine is now nicely displayed in the office of Slagel Manufacturing just north of Strawn, Illinois. No restoration of this motor was required because the paint was still in reasonably good condition, and it was in running condition when it was purchased.

There are now five engines manufactured by the Fairbury Motor Works company known to still exist in the world today. Maybe someday another Fairbury Motor Works engine will be found when someone cleans out their barn somewhere in the United States.



Midget engine manufactured in Fairbury circa 1911 displayed in the offices of Slagel Manufacturing in Forrest, Illinois.